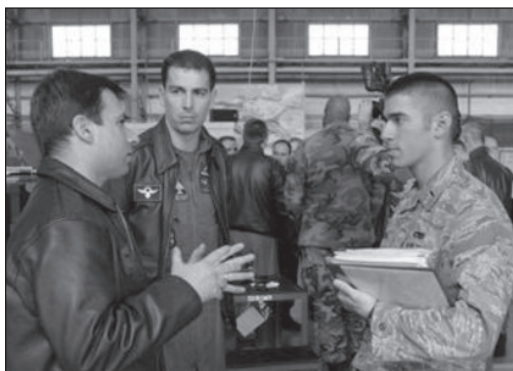

Building Partnerships: Slovenian, Croatian Air Forces Visit 31st Fighter Wing

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During two recent visits to the 31st Fighter Wing [FW] in March, members of the Slovenian and Croatian air forces trained and became more familiarized with the wing mission and how it supports NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization].



A maintenance officer from the 31st Aircraft Maintenance Squadron/510th Aircraft Maintenance Unit, talks about scheduled maintenance practices in the Air Force with Croatian Air Force Officers during a visit here March 17, 2009. The visits is part of the United States Air Forces Europe "Building Partnership Capacity" initiative and provided insight to the Croatian Air Force on how the U.S. Air Force performs its flying and maintenance operations. [U.S. Air Force photographer/Staff Sgt. Patrick Dixon.]

Three members of the 16th Air Surveillance Battalion [ASB] command and reporting post spent two days with Airmen from the 603rd Air Control Squadron [ACS] on March 10-11, and nine members from different levels of the Croatian air force spent a day with the 31st Operations and Maintenance Groups.

The Slovenian visit was part of the [U.S. Air Forces Europe] 'Building Partnership Capacity' initiative to learn how we can train better together and bring more capability to North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), said Captain Michael Lake, 603rd ACS Director of Operations.

The 603rd ACS and the 16th ASB initially met in 2008 while working side-by-side providing air policing and defense during former President George W. Bush's visit to the European Union Summit June 9-10 held in Slovenia.

It was during this [first encounter] that I met our Slovenian counterparts; and as we had some conversations over coffee, said Captain Lake, we discovered that we had common training needs. The friendship that developed out of that has now resulted in this first visit and will hopefully open some more doors so we can do more training together.

Major Andrej Jancevski, Deputy Commander of the 16th ASB, is one of the three Slovenian officers to visit the 31st FW and echoed the Captain's sentiments.

During our security of [President Bush's visit], we got to know each other quite well, said Major Jancevski. Some of our personnel maintained contact with the 603rd, [which is how] the idea to initiate this visit [came about]. It is always great to train with other nations, and this visit has been great. It felt good to be in a familiar environment, and hopefully this will allow for future training here or in Slovenia.

Both sides agreed this first meeting was a success as their duties are relatively the same, controlling aircraft with similar equipment—just different areas of responsibility. The two-day visit allowed both sides to glean more insight as to how each other operates.

It is nice to work with the U.S. because these guys have a lot of experience with real live missions, said Major Jancevski, especially as the U.S. forces have the most combat experience. We are very glad to work with them.

Captain Lake said the visit was very fulfilling and that it was interesting to learn how much both units have in common as battle managers and command and control professionals. He said to get another nation's perspective on the job they do as well as the opportunity to build on the NATO partnership was great. "We see this as the very initial steps of something we hope will go on for many years and continue to grow," said Captain Lake.

A week after the Slovenians wrapped up their visit to Aviano Air Base, also known as the "Pagliano e Gori" Airport, their Croatian neighbors to the south and Italy's east arrived here March 17. The Croatian air force last visited the base in April 2005 for pilot familiarization rides and an air battle manager shadow program.

Our goal [during this meeting] was to share the 31st FW's mission and how we execute it with a soon-to-be NATO ally," said Colonel Walter Isenhour, 31st MXG Deputy Commander. During the visit we hoped to identify ways we can advance our nations' defense mission which is mutually beneficial, particularly given how close geographically we are in the Southeast European region.

Members of the maintenance group here said the visit allowed them to gain insight into how the Croatian's maintenance organization is structured and showed them how the group here is organized.

People involved in aircraft flight and maintenance operations share a common language, regardless of nationality. We immediately found common operational and sustainment challenges and issues we could discuss. We look forward to providing any assistance we can as they move to joining NATO. Colonel Isenhour said the visit went so well they're going to explore the possibility of future maintenance-to-maintenance exchanges to help both air forces learn more about each other's operations.

Collectively, we better understand the challenges each other faces operating in Southeast Europe, said Colonel Isenhour. I believe there is great potential for future interactions that will build better ties that advance our mission effectiveness.

While this might be Croatian air force's last visit to the base as a non-NATO country, this visit helped set-up other long-term goals with the 31st Operations and Maintenance Group here such as routine training due to their close proximity and the Croatian's desire to develop a joint terminal attack controller corps which would provide synergy between both countries' training requirements. The next U.S. and Croatian interaction will most likely occur during the Croatian air force's annual exercise called Adriatic Sword.

This recent visit by the Croatians contributes to the 'Building Partnership Capacity, said Major Matthew Rochon, USAFE [U.S. Air Forces in Europe] Headquarters Deputy Chief Europe and Eurasia Branch. It strengthens our relationship/cooperation and increases NATO interoperability. USAFE is happy that Croatia is on track to become full NATO partners and is thankful for Croatia's contributions to

the International Security Assistance Force and Peace and Stability Operations, he said. We hope that the relationship will continue to grow closer in the future and are encouraged by Croatia's progress toward meeting its NATO objectives.

Both visits by the Slovenian and Croatian air forces are examples of how Airmen in USAFE continue to support both NATO and non-NATO partners. Whether it's a joint training mission or providing an overview of how USAFE conducts operations, the Command is continuously identifying, assessing, and developing key niche Air Force capabilities to develop with key friends and allies.

Since April 4, 1949, 26 countries from North America and Europe now form the alliance committed to fulfilling the goals of the North Atlantic Treaty. The U.S. became a part of NATO in 1949, Slovenia in 2004; and Croatia's candidacy is currently being considered in joining the trans-Atlantic alliance.